



Wecht no stranger to controversy

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By James O'Toole, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Dr. Cyril H. Wecht is accused of mixing private and public business in the county morgue. Prosecutors question his transfers of county property to a lab at a local college. A grand jury hands up a presentment charging the celebrated forensic pathologist with theft of services.



John Heller, Post-Gazette

A federal grand jury yesterday indicted nationally renowned Allegheny County Medical Examiner Dr. Cyril H. Wecht on charges that he misused his public office for private gain.

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Today's news? Yes, but the headlines of a quarter century ago told a remarkably similar tale. Dr. Wecht can only hope that this case of Grant Street deja vu has a similar ending.

The coroner's office had led Dr. Wecht into politics. In the 1960s, he had been involved in a campaign to oust the incumbent and professionalize the office. By the next decade, Dr. Wecht, who had earned a law degree while pursuing his medical residency, was pursuing a broader political agenda. In 1978, he had been elected chairman of the Allegheny County Democratic Party, defeating Sheriff Gene Coon. A rivalry between Mr. Coon and Dr. Wecht would persist for years, and, Dr. Wecht believed, was one of the catalysts for the state charges that he would face.

That rivalry is an example of another echo of Dr. Wecht's legal controversies today and 25 years ago. Both prosecutions arose alongside Dr. Wecht's feuds with powerful law enforcement officials. In the 1960s and 1970s, he was, for various reasons, at odds with Mr. Coon, District Attorney Robert Duggan and later with District Attorney Robert Colville, now a judge. The new charges came after more recent sparring with District Attorney Stephen

A. Zappala Jr. and U.S. Attorney Mary Beth Buchanan. Mr. Zappala was the first to summon the echoes of Dr. Wecht's past with his charge early last year that Dr. Wecht had profited by doing private work for the family of a case handled by the coroner's office, one involving a man who had died in an altercation with the Mount Oliver police.

In 1979, Dr. Wecht announced his candidacy for county commissioner. The same day he declared his candidacy, The Pittsburgh Press broke the news that Dr. Wecht had performed autopsies for other counties at the morgue, depositing the fees in a private bank account. Wecht maintained then and in the subsequent trials that those funds had been used solely to upgrade the office and staff.

That set off a chain of events that climaxed with six weeks of legal melodrama in the spring of 1981. Before that, the county controller levied a \$390,000 civil surcharge against Dr. Wecht for mingling private and public work at the morgue. Dr. Wecht denied any liability and argued that any work he did benefitted the county. In 1983, a court ruled that Dr. Wecht owed the county \$172,410 in the civil case. On appeal that sum was raised to \$250,000. After years of haggling, Dr. Wecht and the county settled, in 1992, on a payment of \$200,000.

After months of investigation, Mr. Colville's office persuaded a grand jury to hand up a multi-count indictment charging that Dr. Wecht had personally profited from work at the coroner's office.

Dr. Wecht's defense team was headed by Stanley Preiser, a dapper, charismatic, former boxer from West Virginia. For six weeks during the spring of 1981, during a trial that rarely left the front page, he sparred with a prosecution team headed by the rangy, combative James Lees, who would later go to work for Preiser's law firm, and the smiling, unflappable Charles DeMonaco.

The jury heard scores of witnesses, including a parade of high-profile pathologists who painted varied portraits of Dr. Wecht's national reputation in his field. In one of the more surreal turns in the testimony, Mr Preiser accused an associate who testified against Dr. Wecht of having made a practice of stabbing corpses in the morgue. Mr. Preiser suggested the incident as an example of pure ghoulishness. The pathologist angrily explained that he had been chronicling the characteristic wounds of various knives for a scientific paper.

The dramatic high point of the trial was Dr. Wecht's three days of testimony and cross-examination punctuated by repeated, bitter exchanges between the defendant and Mr. Lees. During the long days when he was not on the stand, the protean Dr. Wecht spent much of his time at the defense table writing on legal pads as he edited a book on forensic pathology.

The case eventually went to a jury that deliberated for roughly 10 hours over two days before returning a not guilty verdict on the single remaining charge of theft of services, a decision that produced cheers in the courtroom where the trial had gone on a floor above the courthouse chamber where Wecht presided in his role as county commissioner.

Jurors told Post-Gazette reporters afterwards that they had initially been divided six to six on whether or not to acquit. One told the Post-Gazette, "A lot of the jurors felt he was guilty, felt it in their hearts, but the case wasn't proved. There was reasonable doubt."

Another said of Dr. Wecht's testimony, "He helped his case an awful lot ... he looked as truthful as he could. If he did anything wrong, it wasn't intentional. It was for someone else's benefit, the county, or the people he was training."

Immediately after the verdict came in, Dr. Wecht held an impromptu news conference,

calling for the resignation of Mr. Colville while denouncing his other political enemies. The trauma of the 1981 trial didn't appear to dim his zest for politics. The next year, he took on a long shot challenge to the popular U.S. Sen. John Heinz but was trounced. In 1984, he lost successive elections for county Democratic chairman and state Democratic chairman, defeats that led to more than a decade away from public office.

He returned to politics and was once again elected coroner in 1997. He was the Democrats' nominee for the new office of county executive in 1999 but lost in an upset to Republican Jim Roddey.

But for all that political tumult, Dr. Wecht's most memorable Election Day was that of the May primary in 1981, the same day that 12 jurors found him not guilty.

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